

[Reprinted from *American Medicine*, Vol. VIII, No. 19, pages 805-808, November 5, 1904.]

TAINE'S ILL-HEALTH.

BY

GEORGE M. GOULD, M.D.,

of Philadelphia.

His teacher, Vacherot, said of Taine at the age of 22, that he was the hardest worker and the most remarkable student he had ever known at the *École Normale*; that he was prodigiously learned for his age; that he had an ardor and an avidity for knowledge such as his teacher had never before known. Those who have read Taine's works must have been struck by his marvelous power of absorbing and digesting knowledge, and his ability—he was philosopher, historian, and critic, all in one—to present the systematized results of his erudition with a thoroughness, sympathy, succinctness, and brilliancy rarely, if ever, equaled. Few, however, are aware of the difficulties this great litterateur encountered in carrying out his scholarly ideals, his poverty, the opposition of the church and of those envious of his remarkable talents and industry, and particularly the ill-health, which like a vindictive fate pursued him so relentlessly. Even those who may have learned something of these things have probably not an adequate conception of the exact nature and origin of the man's sufferings and of how they prevented the realization of his aims in literature, which, without the crippled executive ability, would have resulted in wonders.

Taine was born in 1828, and at the age of 11 "he had devoured everything in the way of books that came into his hands, especially the classic authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." This precocious ripening of his mind and enormous amount of reading seems not to have produced serious evil results to his health during adolescence. He was "somewhat fragile" at 12, and needed to pick up health and strength at 20. At 21 his troubles began. The following excerpts from his letters and from his biographer's notes are sufficiently self-explanatory and illuminative of the nature of his

disorder, so that they may be given without the interruptions of annotations :

It often happens to me to fall into a state of languid depression, during which I spend hours on my bed or in an arm-chair, in that sort of mental prostration so dreary and oppressive, which you know. (21.)

I have a bad headache at this moment, and am incapable of serious thought—I am even going to take a few days' rest. (21.)

Cholera, or a sort of mild imitation of it, seized hold of me, and laid me low those few days. (21.)

When my head aches with work (study). (23.)

If my head aches. (23.)

Hegel makes my head ache. (23.)

Studies so fatiguing that I feel I never really appreciated rest before. (23.)

I am in the dumps. It happens to me when my head aches, and I have no resource but to laugh at myself and others. (23.)

Sometimes I have headaches, moments of weakness, when my solitude palls upon me. (23.)

Struggling in the most marshy depths of the bog of melancholy. (24.)

This last resource—writing—is failing. I am not well, and in such depressed spirits that I find it impossible to string two ideas together. My last refuge against myself has failed. (24.)

There are days when I am so sick of myself that I should like to throw myself away. (24.)

My aching brain prevents me from finding a relief in work. (24.)

The country is an opiate for troubled brains. (24.)

When my head aches. (25.)

This horrid scribbling dazzles me, and my head seems full of pages, letters, lines, corrections, etc. (25.)

Bored when my head aches. (25.)

The immoderate labor of those years began to exhaust his powers. In October he was seized with a granular laryngitis, from which he suffered for several years. (Biography 25.)

The bad state of his health lasted during the winter. His physician advised spending his vacation at St. Sauveur. (Biography 26.)

He was obliged to limit his work hours and lectures. (Biography 27.)

For a month I have not spoken six sentences aloud. (25.)

The cure of the throat is slow. (26.)

Impossible to study with the least appreciation; immediate head symptoms. My winter is being lost. May the beautiful, lovely spring be medicine for me. (26.)

I am doing everything to be cured, without much success. (26.)

My throat does not better. I shall probably be compelled to go to some watering place and pass the winter in the South. (26.)

The worst is that my head is so bad that I am unable to apply myself for an hour, beside having an increase of feverishness.—

If I had not this fever and a head so ailing. (26.)

My throat is better, the homeopath prescribing phosphorus, which perhaps will cure me. (26.)

I am an old man, used up, tired of everything, hopeless. (26.)

Sick today. (26.)

When I do not have headache I write. (26.)

To what watering place I do not know, the physician will decide. (26.)

I have left the homeopath, who was tiresome. The good I thought he was doing to me was really the summer season and the company of my mother. Many physicians are sceptics in medicine. Some believe only in quinin and surgery. (26.)

Worse for several days. I leave in July. (26.)

The necessity of doing nothing, six weeks of it under a burning sun, without distraction, except to drink rotten-egg water, etc. (26.)

A poor machine out of repair. (26.)

The waters of Eaux-Bonnes are as valueless as those of Saint-Sauveur. (26.)

Not cured, not curable. (26.)

Since I have been ill I think everybody is ill, or should be. (26.)

If I may believe the medical men, a race little to be trusted, I shall be better in a month, the waters acting only at a distance. (26.)

When I do not have headache. (26.)

. . . more frequently it creates headache; I stick in my room, badly cured, working seldom. (26.)

I continue extracting descriptions from my sick head. (26.)

I am no better. Take care of your health; if it goes you can't tell when it will come back again. (26.)

Three months in the Pyrenees in complete idleness, trying to cure my sick head and throat. (29.)

Try never to be sick. (26.)

He returned from his trip to the Springs suffering severely. Lecturing tired his voice. (Biography 27.)

I was sick and could not visit you. Neuralgias, congestions, huge nails in the nerves of my neck—for a month utterly crippled. (27.)

I am studying the influence of the body upon the mind, and I ask myself what is the use of sensory nerves scattered so abundantly in our physical machine, unless to make us suffer uselessly, for the glory of God. (27.)

The Eaux-Bonnes waters left me *statu quo*. I failed in faith, in that as in other things, and am punished. (27.)

I have swallowed a cargo of books. (27.)

What woes of the eyes and of the head? How many hours of mechanical reading? I am only a machine disgusted with itself. (27.)

If Eaux-Bonnes cured his laryngitis (*sic*) he had to pay dearly the ransom for his excess of work . . . He was halted by a crisis of cerebral fatigue and nervous depression lasting for two years. He had to suspend entirely his work in philosophy, and was able to resume it only ten years later. He had also to renounce literary work in part; he wrote less and less frequently, condemned to long months of complete inaction during which he was unable to read much. (Biography 27.)

For long hours, lying in his room, the eyes closed to avoid the light of day, which wounded his suffering head, he was read to by a little secretary helper. (Biography, 27.)

At times, in order to get sleep which had disappeared, he undertook fatiguing exercise, splitting wood, etc. (Biography, 27.)

After a year of this rusting he was able for a few months to work (study) for two or three hours a day. (Biography, 27.)

Finding himself again suffering, he undertook voyages for the sake of diversion and to revive his intellect. But the threatening crisis was not conjured away by these journeys. He became more ill than before, and 1859 was the year the most saddening and sterile of his life. He believed seriously that his intellectual powers were entirely broken. He tried to take up his work, but the pen or the book soon slipped from his hands, and he fell back into his old cruel inactivity. Only at the end of the year with infinite devices did he begin to write. He has had since then frequent periods of forced leisure, but never one so persistent and intense. (Biographer 31.)

Sick for four months, unable to write and even to read, having a cap of lead on my head and frequent neuralgias. Nothing did any good, neither hydrotherapy, iron pills, or dieting. My physicians tell me to have patience and to keep still. I have renounced all work. (28.)

Pardon me that I write so little; I am no longer a man, only an inferior sort of mollusc, and I feel my head no more except to suffer with it. (28.)

A sick man who plants cabbages and walks five miles a day. (28.)

Against orders I have lately made use of my poor head. (28.)

Far from cured. I work two or three hours a day, in the morning, with the greatest precautions; the rest of the time I rub myself with cold water, sleep, digest, etc.—I go to bed at 9. This is why I do not write. (30.)

One has to adapt one's self to his readers, if he would have his book sell at the newsstands. (30.)

I accustom myself to live even though suffering. I am becoming patient. I bend my back. I am 30. I am going into the country to better my health. (30.)

My voyage is delightful. Flanders has beautiful landscapes, and it encourages ideas. (30.)

Especially I, who have bad eyes, and have abused them. (30.)

I am suffering very much, always from my head. I read or write scarcely two hours in the morning, and the rest of the day I am idle and kill time sadly. (30.)

Not cured, although it was the chief object. I am forced to pass my life in walking the streets—what can one learn when he has to go to bed at 9 o'clock? (30.)

I am entirely down, commanded neither to write nor read. (31.)

A little better, not much, I read one hour a day. (31.)

I wander sadly through the woods. I am a steam engine without fire, rusting, and rotting. (31.)

He did not dare to undertake his great work in his state of weariness. (Biography 32.)

He had entirely given up private teaching, but he knew how study, pushed to an extreme, exhausted his forces. (Biography 32.)

Appointed examiner. It had the advantage of demanding only three months work a year, and compelled him to stop his studies during the summer, which had been an affliction to him. (Biography 32.)

I have headache. It is my vicious habit. (33.)

My excuse for not writing for three months is my headache; it is only half well now; I have done nothing for several weeks and even now I work at the most only three hours a

day, so that I am cross when it comes to writing even to my excellent friend. (33.)

Head as usual. I have reading done aloud to me; go to bed at 9, walk the quays. (33.)

Keep your health, it is the substratum of the essence of substance. (33.)

The literary life here, the necessity of earning one's bread by black lines drawn out of the head is too hard. (34.)

Shall I be able to work? For a month I have not written a line; I had too great headache. I should have had to erase it all. I do not know when I can recommence my book, and the undesired inaction and empty revery ends in eating away my life. (34.)

I tried to occupy my forced leisure. I made notes in London, went up the Thames, to the Derby, to balls, to the slums, to the docks, to country houses. I copied, at the British Museum, an English Medieval author, etc. (34.)

On my return to England I had to blot out a month, and that made two which were lost. (34.)

I have exhausted my brain; I am obliged to stop and remain idle several times a year, sometimes for three or four months; I have remained for two whole years incapable of writing, and even of reading. Writing requires a tremendous effort on my part, and after two or three hours, sometimes one hour only, I am obliged to leave off, having become quite unable to string two ideas together. My manner of writing must be contrary to nature, since it is so laborious. Several people, friends, have told me that it is strained, wearisome, and difficult to read. (34.)

I have much more difficulty in writing, to order facts or ideas, than formerly. A school-boy's task is an enormous weight which I lift only with effort. (34.)

. . . constant efforts and very little result. If I succeed in reaching the necessary state of mind, it only lasts an hour or half an hour, and it kills me. It is probable that I have tried to unite two irreconcilable faculties; one must choose and be either an artist or an orator.

I think I have found the root of my complaint, for my fundamental idea has been that the particular passion or emotion of the man who is described should be reproduced, and all the degrees of logical generation stated. In fact, that a character should be painted after the manner of artists and constructed at the same time after the manner of reasoners. It is a true idea productive of powerful results when it can be applied, but it is unwhinging to the brain and we have no right to destroy ourselves. (34.)

If all this is correct, I must change my style, which is a serious undertaking. A rest, and an extensive one, is first necessary, then a search among my remaining faculties, such as I may put to use. I shall finish my "History of English Literature" in accordance with the former method. . . . But after this work is finished I must change. But what is left of me? What ability? (34.)

During his long periods of forced idleness and suffering he had dreamed, etc. (Biography 34.)

He set out for Naples and a softer climate. (Biography 36.)

There is so much emptiness, physical lassitude, and spleen, etc. (36.)

I shall return next month and study—study is the proper word; I have already bought some books, but I have too bad eyes, and also a hurrying imagination, which spoils everything

in advance. I admit that I have found things in the engravings more beautiful than the reality itself. (36.)

It was well to go. I had to shake myself up, I was becoming sick. (34.)

My pleasure was not great as I was too used up. Yesterday curled up in bed or in my chair, and all this morning. (34.)

It was even an effort to write a letter. My eyes are painful, attention is immediately exhausted, anxiety supervenes, and with that, spleen. (34.)

I am 36 years old. My life which is in the past is the healthy and strong part. The second part now commencing will soon be a descent; but through work I may make something of it. (36.)

Sightseeing for four or five hours (at Padua) produces not only pain in the neck, back, etc., but attention is also exhausted; I am incapable of a single idea, and I have to close my eyes while I sit. (36.)

Your poor Marcelain (himself) is exhausted; he works to excess, has a suffering head, is too sleepless. I am much troubled that he is using up his forces. His mother (he is writing to her) is much tormented. His affairs otherwise go well—subscribers, announcements, esteem, success, are here. Let us hope that, like Woepke, he will not fall on arriving. The day is filled with public duties, and it is only toward midnight, on the return home, that he becomes an artist. He can then not resist the need of noting down his ideas and systematizing them. And the waking causes so much suffering! (36.)

If the intelligent reader has looked over the foregoing excerpts attentively, the cause of this life tragedy and the harm done to literature, will be plain. Especially if the similar histories gathered in the two volumes "Biographic Clinics," are known. The case histories of all patients with the same morbidity-producing cause at work seem to a careless eye to differ from each other in marked degrees. To the physician's discrimination, however, the differences are either in the external circumstances of the patient, or in his peculiar or individual differences of inheritance, resisting powers, tasks, etc. In the case of the reflexes of eyestrain the clinical histories are likely to vary astonishingly according to the organs that bear the brunt of the derouted nerve discharges. This is a fact now familiar to modern oculists. But even in the most aberrant types there are certain facts and phases common to all: The suffering, of whatever kind, is directly consequent upon the use of the eyes; it increases in intensity with the lessening of the accommodative power; the sole method of stopping the suffering is by nonuse of the eyes; the depressing effect upon the mind and feelings is always present; the disease being functional, and not organic, the essential health and vitality are not at first, nor for a long time, and usually never, irremediably affected. After the



crisis the mental and physical energies suddenly return with astonishing promptness and energy.¹

In the 15 biographic clinical cases I have studied, these and a number of other characteristics, such as insomnia, depression, limited power of working, etc., usually present, have been found, and the notes from Taine show them also present in his life.

When an otherwise healthy young person has headache upon near use of the eyes, every physician nowadays knows what is the cause of it. When melancholy, physical and mental weariness, inability to use the eyes, insomnia, etc., become marked, when an excessive amount of reading and writing makes old symptoms more intense and produces others, there is no doubt as to what a scientific correction of the existing ametropia will do. No patient of the 16 studied saw this simple relation of effect and cause, nor did any of their physicians. Each and all traced it to the peculiar character of the intellectual work done, or to the excessive amount of it. The popular newspaper nonsense about "brain fog," shows the old error much alive among us now, although the simplest observation would make it manifest that where there is one who has "brain exhaustion" from overwork, there are a hundred who have no such symptoms from an equal or a greater amount of intellectual labor. This brilliant genius was a cynic in philosophy, but in real life pitiful and charitable, a determinist in scientific ethics, but at the end he confessed, as applied to the French Revolution, that such a creed could not explain. How much his unnecessary suffering molded his character would be impossible to decide, but it is certain that it hardened it to an appreciable degree.

Taine was forced to go through the hydropathy and water cures, the dieting, etc., just as all the other migraine sufferers of the last century did—those who were financially able to do so. The vast majority had not the money for such vagaries. Taine was one; he was so poor that he had to undertake guidebook compilation, and all sorts of pedagogic and literary potboiling tasks in order to carry out the cult of these superstitions. Travel, open-air walking, "change of scene," etc., gave the others some relief, at least temporarily, except those who, like Taine, were doomed by an insatiable hunger and a driving necessity to carry books

¹ His letters often speak of being in "good health" during the very weeks when he was temporarily suffering from migraine—a wellknown clinical fact.

with them or find great numbers of them wherever they went. When the eyes were really rested there was the inevitable relief.

Taine's "granular laryngitis," "cured by the waters at a distance," shows the possible reflex of eyestrain to the upper air passages, a fact noted by observant oculists. When it was cured his head symptoms grew worse.

The dip into homeopathy is not so amusing as that of the Carlyles, but shows the clear-headedness of Taine, who had a not inconsiderable medical education.

My notes stop at the age of 36, with the two columns of the *Life and Correspondence* that have been issued. He lived for 28 years after this till 1893, and died at 64. It is comparatively useless to continue the study for the rest of the life, even if the remaining volumes had been published. Either the patient got some glasses several years before he died, which in some measure lessened his evident eyestrain, or his sufferings continued, probably increased, until the end of the presbyopic period, or until his myopia lessened the usual reflexes of this time of life. That he was myopic even in middle manhood is plain from some of the sentences quoted. It is the old story repeated—the production or increase of myopia by uncorrected ametropia. That he was also astigmatic and anisometropic is beyond question from the fact of his most severe reflexes caused by use of his eyes, both to the eyes themselves, and to the brain. Only Professor Möbius of Germany still believes that there is no eyestrain, nor any migraine due to it, in myopia—by which term he means, what is unknown to him, compound myopic astigmatism. All of these inferences would be sufficiently clear without the demonstration given by a late photograph of M. Taine, which I reproduce. This picture shows that toward the end of life there was paretic, almost paralytic, ptosis or drooping of the lids, a somewhat frequent result of long-continued eyestrain. In the right it is greater than in the left, showing the longer and more severe, but at last ineffectual, effort to keep the right eye in function. The entire expression of the eyes and neighboring structures speaks plainly of the struggle. "His eyes showed a cast behind their spectacles," says one who knew him in later life. The date at which the right eye gave up the attempt at binocular vision is not suggested in the life and letters. In the picture it is plainly strabismic, or turned in. Its exclusion from use marked the end of

long and painful period of effort, which, while it lasted, produced great suffering, and when completed would probably bring a decided, possibly an entire, measure of relief. How easy it is at present to prevent in modern patients the entire list of evils which is evident in the case of Taine! And yet there are still many thousands in the civilized world enduring them as he did only 30 or 40 years ago!

American Medicine

FOUNDED, OWNED, AND CONTROLLED BY THE
MEDICAL PROFESSION OF AMERICA.

GEORGE M. GOULD, Editor
G. C. C. HOWARD, Managing Editor

Subscription, \$5 a year
Advertisements limited to 44 pages

A subscription to American Medicine
is an endorsement of profes-
sional journalism.